2 The gendered search to connect: Females and social media in rural, Northern Ireland

Anne Rice[1]

Abstract

Technology has changed family life and nowadays most of us live in 'virtual homes' from which we can connect with anyone, anywhere. This has the potential to improve the quality of social capital between geographically separated family members. Social capital refers to the relationships individuals form with each other and the resources obtained from these relationships (Coleman, 1988; Halpern, 2005). It is a concept that differentiates between bridging (weak ties that provide information) and bonding (strong bonds that provide emotional support) social capital (Putnam, 2000). This chapter reveals that social networking websites such as Facebook help maintain connections between family at home and those that have emigrated. As such, a new level of global family social capital (Rice, 2014) has emerged in the social networking era. However, for rural families it is often the case that mothers are at the center of global family social capital and fathers remain on the margins. This chapter outlines the under-representation of rural fathers in terms of social networking use and discusses what impact this has on them as individuals and more widely on established social capital theory.

Keywords: social capital, Facebook in Ireland, gender and the Internet, social media and rural communities.

1. E-mail address: arice05@qub.ac.uk

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1. Introduction

As the use of the Internet increases, more and more people are using technologies and social networking websites such as Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn. Social networking sites have been defined by Boyd and Ellison (2007) as "web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi public profile within a bounded system; (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection; and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system" (p. 221). The use of these sites has been accompanied by, and contributed to, significant shifts in social interaction. For example, today, individual family members frequently exchange messages from their computers and phones to loved ones on the other side of the world. From the comfort of their own home, families can stay connected with people geographically separated from them. The scale of this change to modern family relations is massive with 1.3 billion people worldwide now using Facebook (Albergotti, 2014). However, little is known about which family members take responsibility for nurturing online connections with those separated from them by emigration. This study hopes to fill the research gap in this area.

This chapter is based on research carried out between 2010 and 2011 in a rural area of Northern Ireland. It involved 11 focus groups and 36 in-depth interviews with young people (aged 16-18) and their parents. The research examined the impact of the social networking website, Facebook, on individual, community and family social capital. Based on findings from this investigation, the chapter specifically examines the outcome of Facebook use for family social capital. It reveals gender differences in terms of who is searching to stay connected in the new era of global family social capital.

The chapter begins with an overview of the female investment in global family social capital (Rice, 2014). It then progresses to discuss the lack of interest by fathers in regard to social networking in rural areas. The chapter then acknowledges the limitations of this study. Finally, the implications of these findings are discussed –how they impact traditional social capital theory and rural males.

2. Female investment in global family social capital

Traditionally, family social capital was mostly found in the relationships between family members who were bound together in shared physical locations (Coleman, 1988). Nowadays, the Internet has facilitated the spread of social capital across geographical boundaries. Unlike previous generations, family members can invest in global family social capital. However, in this study it is revealed that mothers, more so than fathers, are using websites such as Facebook to stay connected with emigrated family members.

For example, the gender imbalance is illustrated when Rosin and Dermot's[1] accounts are compared. Rosin's brother Brian moved from Ireland to Australia two years ago and social networking opens up new possibilities for social capital which are unrelated to the geographical place each lives or the geographical distance that separates them. In this regard, Rosin explains that by seeing her brother's photos and online status updates, she feels that he is still living close by her despite the fact he is now living in Australia.

Rosin says:

> "I don't have to be online chatting with him all the time but with Facebook and seeing his photos and posts it feels like he is just over the road from me, well apart from the sand and sun" (Research notes).

This is a very different account to that of Dermot:

> "I have no interest but my wife does. She keeps in contact with our son in Australia and also my sister in Australia and brother in Canada" (Research notes).

This female investment in global family social capital is not something that is unique to the social networking era. Traditionally mothers, as opposed to fathers,

1. These quotations come from the research I conducted from 2010 through 2011 in rural Ireland.

have been the main driving force when it comes to connections with wider kin (Dill, 1998; Moore, 1990). Thus while global family social capital might be unique to contemporary society it is governed by traditional gender roles and practices.

Indeed the study reveals that younger females in the household are often the people who equip mothers with the skills to navigate through the world of social networking. For example, Rosin was unsure of how to use Facebook and this condition was reversed by her daughter Emma:

> "The only reason I started using it was to keep in touch with my brother Brian and kids who are in Australia. Emma, [my daughter] was saying to me go onto it. Then one day Emma set me up on it. She's great and keeps me right on the computer" (Research notes).

Here Emma helps familiarize her mother with the world of social networking. Therefore, while teenagers often provide the rest of the family with technical-computing help, more so than any other age group (Kiesler, Zdaniuk, Lundmark, & Kraut, 2000), this study shows that in terms of social networking, this help is often given by female teenagers.

In other accounts it is the individual who is emigrating that encourages the use of social networking. However, it is striking that the invitation is extended to the females in the family circle. Before emigrating, Carla's niece invites her to be her friend online:

> "…she was so sad leaving that before she left she got us to agree, us her aunts and her mum, that Facebook would be our contact place. She had a Beebo account but for some reason preferred that we stay in touch with her on Facebook. I found from my own experience it was full of drivel and I stayed on it for her even though it wasn't my cup of tea" (Research notes).

Carla shows that Facebook provides a 'contact point' where family members can

stay in touch with those who have emigrated. Aunts have traditionally played a vital role in young people's lives (in an offline sense) in various ways, as "a teacher, role model, confidante, savvy peer, and second mother" (Ellingson & Sotirin, 2006, p. 483). Therefore, even if the bulk addition of aunts on line by nieces is motivated, as in Carla's niece's case, by a reluctance to leave home; it is possible that after the initial emigration period the online friendships will remain active.

3. Rural fathers' lack of interest in social networking

Throughout the study, fathers display less interest in immersing themselves in the world of social networking. Bobby explains that:

> "I work a bit with computers and although I am an amateur I know a fair bit about them but I'm not into Facebook or have any inclination to be" (Research notes).

While Bobby understands the mechanics of computing he, like Dermot, has no motivation to use Facebook. As 97% of UK households with children now have internet access (Dutton, Blank, & Groselj, 2013), it appears the lack of uptake by fathers is not as a result of poor availability but possibly a lack of desire. This situation calls for more study.

This lack of interest in social networking on the part of fathers seems to relate to the perception that social networking is a time-wasting activity that displaces physical work. Brenda describes her husband's zero tolerance approach to her son spending hours at a time on Facebook:

> "But the thing is when my husband comes home he'll go for him [her son] because he doesn't get this sitting around thing. He would rather see him spending his spare time doing the lawn or something rather than being on Facebook" (Research notes).

Similarly, Colette says of her father:

> "When I'm in the house I do go on it all the time. God yeah it's something I do like just breathing. Like she (her mum Sheila) finds that weird cus Mum you're not on it with friends that much. Dad knows nothing about Facebook or how many friends I have, how much I'm on it but he still gives me all this 'back in the day business.' He goes on about how young people weren't like sitting around gossiping on computers they hadn't time they were always made to work" (Research notes).

Colette's father frequently takes issue with the time she spends online. He has no desire to become more knowledgeable about her online life but he is convinced that it is causing a time displacement in terms of physical work.

While fathers in this study demonstrate little interest in Facebook, in other instances a new found interest is ignited by a major change to family life. For example, in the post divorce family, fathers often, due to physical separation, employ Facebook to maintain contact with their children. Facebook is an extremely social tool for fathers and children to communicate, especially when the mother-father relationship is poor or nonexistent.

For example, Brian has been using Facebook since his divorce two years ago. His online communication with his two children compensates for spending less time with them. The appeal of social networking is twofold. First, in Brian's case, he communicates with his children through private chat and shares photos with them. Second, it avoids the social awkwardness of having to speak to their mother or her boyfriend. He states: "Facebook is a way I get to keep in touch with my kids without having to make small talk with my ex-wife and her boyfriend on the landline" (Research notes).

Observations in the pre-social networking era notes the move from full-time to part-time fatherhood is often difficult to come to terms with (Kruk, 1994). In Brian's case it is shown that the continuous communication on Facebook (viewing comments on others pages, status updates, etc.) smoothes this

transition. In terms of global social capital, it also opens up new networks which were previously unavailable. Indeed, Brian notes this when he says he probably would have not gone on Facebook if his family circumstances had stayed the same: "I now have access to a whole new network where I now can keep in touch with family and friends living abroad" (Research notes).

4. Limitations

This study has two notable limitations. First, all of the participating fathers were over 45 years old. It might be the case that a very different picture would emerge in the case of younger fathers and their use of social networking. This is likely given the fact that social networking is "highest among 16-24 year olds [...but] decreases with age" (OFCOM, 2008, p. 5) and in the UK almost half of those over the age of fifty five have never been online (BBC, 2011).

Second, today's technology changes rapidly. The young people and their families participating in this study were interviewed during 2010 and 2011. At that time participants had only limited access to broadband. However, more recent research shows rural broadband in Northern Ireland exceeds even that of urban uptake (OFCOM, 2013). Therefore rural fathers may be a more defined group of Internet users given the time that has passed.

5. Advancing social capital theory

Despite these limitations the evidence presented in this chapter advances social capital theory in two ways. First, it identifies and explains a new level of social capital, namely global family social capital. The existence of global social capital makes questionable the assumptions that dominate the traditional social capital literature. For example, early social capital theory had a strong focus on joint mother-father investment for social capital production. In contrast, this chapter suggests thatglobal family social capital exists with little to no male input and should flourish just as well in the variety of modern family forms beyond the

nuclear family. Unlike early claims about social capital, non-intact families or lone motherhood does not pose a threat to social capital. This is because mothers and daughters are the catalyst behind global family social capital and males have little input in creating and sustaining it.

Second, the use of technology means that social capital is no longer rooted in place and location as was the case during the pre-social networking era. For example, despite their very different applications and interpretations of social capital, Coleman (1988) and Putnam (2000) both argue its quality is something that varies between countries and nations. For Coleman (1988), social capital was, as illustrated in his classic example of the distinction between New York and Jerusalem, very different from one country and cultural tradition to the next. Additionally, while Putnam's (2000) central concern was dwindling social capital in the United States, he does draw distinctions between the quality of social capital between North and South Italy. Given that in the social networking era, people, such as Carla's niece or Rosin's brother, can connect with family members regardless of being separated by geographical distance, social capital now transcends space and place, and connections are not as limited by geography as they were in the past.

6. Conclusion: being offline increases rural disadvantage

In one sense by remaining offline some rural fathers are circumventing the dangers linked to social networking such as lack of privacy and risk taking (Stephenson-Abetz & Holman, 2012). However, they also miss out on a number of opportunities to use the Internet to suit their needs, make life easier, more enjoyable and productive. The UK government has welcomed technological advances such as broadband for its "ability to transform our lives –whether in business, education or in how we use our leisure time" and for being an essential resource to compete in the global knowledge economy (Tony Blair, 2005). Generally, the broad aim is to make the UK the most digitally capable nation in the world (Dutton et al., 2013). While the world races further and faster online,

it appears that individuals lagging behind will be disadvantaged economically, educationally and socially.

The negative social impact of not being online may be heightened by one's location, such as living in a rural area. Traditionally the rural was perhaps perceived as "backward", "disconnected" and "isolated" from the perspective of the people that live there (Research notes). Internet use overcomes the disadvantage of being physically remote from family and improves the lives of rural residents (Valentine & Holloway, 2001). The Internet and social networking has the potential to 'connect' rural dwellers to a larger world. In this study rural fathers are missing out on a range of opportunities for increased sociability in this larger online world. From a social capital perspective a failure to connect with globally dispersed family means one misses out on additional emotional support (bonding social capital) and informational support (bridging social capital). By tapping into this extra reserve of social capital and particularly bonding social capital for increased emotional support, Northern Ireland males might increase their health and well being. Presently, males in Northern Ireland are at a distinct gender disadvantage in terms of health and well-being, and are five times more likely to die by suicide (Richardson, Clarke, & Fowler, 2013).

Additionally, from an economic perspective the failure to nurture online connections may give males a disadvantage in the global economy and the modern workplace where skills, such as networking and sustaining online relations are valued therein. This poses a major problem considering technology has a fast pace of change. It appears that the longer one remains offline, the more difficult it may be to catch up with technological advancements.

The examples presented in this chapter support other rural research across Europe. It has been widely noted that age determines the way in which the benefits of social networking are distributed among rural populations. For example, it is young people who most frequently use social networking in rural Wales (Milbourne & Kitchen, 2014). Similarly, in rural Finland, Internet use (in general) is a routine and everyday practice for young people but is not widely used by older age groups (Kilpeläinen & Seppänen, 2014). None of these studies,

however, have noted a greater use of social networking among rural mothers than fathers. It would be interesting to establish if similar gender patterns are observed in other rural regions of other countries or if these gender patterns are something unique to Northern Ireland.

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